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Ten-Scott Report

Attacks Still
UnexplainedBy ROBERT S. ALLEN
AND PAUL SCOTT

Mr. Allen

Top Democratic and Republican leaders of Congress still are just as much in the dark as the public as to what was behind those provocative North Vietnamese attacks that caused the U.S. to blast their torpedo boat bases.

The congressional chiefs got no answer to this mystery at their meeting with the President when he told them of his decision to resort to armed retaliation.

The President and all of his attending State Department and Pentagon authorities frankly admitted they were baffled by the Reds' surprise PT boat attacks in the Gulf of Tonkin. It was asserted that nothing unusual had occurred to trigger them, and there had been no advance warning from Intelligence.

Flanking the President were Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Central Intelligence Director John McCone, and McGeorge Bundy, special White House foreign relations adviser.

While acknowledging having no explanation for North Viet Nam's sudden aggression, they did present some theories —

—The PT boat assaults on the U. S. destroyers were designed to distract attention from a considerable build-up of Red Chinese combat planes on North Viet Nam bases in recent weeks. This menacing development has been under close scrutiny, and the Reds were aware of that and may have been seeking to divert it.

—The same may be true regarding a big build-up of anti-aircraft and other defenses at key points on the North Viet Nam and China coast of the Gulf of Tonkin, and the nearby Chinese coast. The latter particularly has been under constant U.S. surveillance.

—A large movement of arms and men from Red China across the Gulf of Tonkin may have been contemplated, and the PT boat attacks were made in the hope of creating a diplomatic furore that would induce the U.S. to withdraw its naval patrols from this strategic area. This Communist expectation may have been based on the turbulent political and racial situation in the U.S.

Most of the theorizing was expounded by CIA Director McCone, although the President did some himself.

McCone's somewhat lame admission that his giant intelligence agency had no concrete information on the cause or objective of this surprise Red aggression drew disapproving stares from the congressional leaders. Later, among themselves, there was sharp criticism of McCone and the CIA.

With one exception, all the congressional chiefs fully approved the President's decision to immediately counterattack North Viet Nam's torpedo boat bases.

The exception was Senate Democratic Leader Mike Mansfield.

The Montanan, who has long advocated some form of neutralization of South Viet Nam, did not outrightly oppose the President's avowed intention. But Mansfield made it clear he didn't like it, and favored instead recourse to the United Nations or some other diplomatic channel.

That was flatly rejected by Senators Richard Russell, D-Ga., head of the Armed Services Committee and leader of the Southern bloc, Republican Floor Leader Everett Dirksen, Ill., and Assistant Democratic Leader Hubert H. Humphrey, Minn., who directed the admin-

istration's successful fight to put the new civil rights law through the upper chamber.

They heartily endorsed the President's determination to immediately retaliate with armed force.

"It's fatal to trifle with aggression," said Humphrey. "Failure to strike back hard and fast is certain to lead to more aggression. We cannot afford for one moment to let the Communists get away with these attacks. They must be dealt with immediately and in kind."

"Those are exactly my sentiments," declared Dirksen. "That is the only sound and effective course you can pursue, Mr. President, and I'll back it to the hilt."

Throughout the conference, the President was serious but gave no sign of being uneasy. He told the congressional leaders that the air attacks against the Red PT boat bases were timed for 8:00 p.m. EDT, but extremely bad weather might cause delay.

That's what happened—which explains why the President did not make his nationwide radio-TV broadcast until close to midnight. He did not want to start when the air strikes actually were underway.

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